

U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION®

TRAVEL FUELS EVERY INDUSTRY AND DISTRICT IN AMERICA

Travel is *indispensable* to the nation's economic success and global competitiveness.

U.S. Travel Association is the national, non-profit organization representing the \$1.2 trillion travel industry, an essential contributor to our nation's economy and success. The U.S. travel industry encompasses all facets of the traveler's journey—from airports, airlines and hotels to attractions, convention and visitor bureaus and the destination itself. Travel is a key contributor to America's vitality.

TRAVEL FUELS EVERY INDUSTRY

Travel facilitates commerce and business development for every industry. From manufacturing and agriculture to defense and healthcare, every industry depends on travel to drive growth, innovation, education, training and operations—and communities across the country depend on travel for their livelihood. Travel spurs economic development, creates quality jobs for millions of American workers and generates much-needed tax revenue to support critical public-sector jobs. Plus, travel has the added benefit of connecting communities and cultures, helping to enable broader perspectives and cultural awareness.

TARGETED POLICIES TO ADVANCE SEAMLESS & SECURE TRAVEL AND SUPPORT THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

Inbound International Travel

- **Reduce Visa Interview Wait Times**

1. **Senate:** Cosponsor S. 2632, the Visa Processing Improvement Act.
2. **House:** Support House companion legislation to S. 2632, the Visa Processing Improvement Act.
3. **The Visa Processing Improvement Act would:**
 - i. Authorize remote interviews over videoconferencing for low-risk non-immigrant visa applicants.
 - ii. Establish a visa interview wait time standard of 21 days and give the State Department the flexibility to transfer resources—this could include funds, personnel or tech to consular posts with average wait times above the standard for sustained periods for the purpose of reducing wait times.
 - iii. Permanently extend interview waiver authority for returning/renewing low-risk visitor, worker, and student visas.
 - iv. Create expedited and in-country processing options for renewing visa applicants, while retaining the authority to require travelers to leave the country and complete an in-person interview.

In 2019, 43% of international inbound travelers came from countries in which the U.S. requires visitors to obtain a visa to enter the United States. In 2022, first-time visitor visa applicants

from the U.S.'s top inbound markets faced interview wait times exceeding 400 days on average, which U.S. Travel estimates will cost the U.S. economy \$7 billion in 2023 if allowed to continue.

- **Fully fund the new Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Travel & Tourism:** Urge House and Senate appropriators to fund the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Travel and Tourism in the FY24 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill. As authorized by the bipartisan Visit America Act, the Assistant Secretary will be responsible for creating a national strategy to grow the travel economy, working across the government to make the travel system more efficient and reliable, and helping U.S. cities and counties compete to host large international meetings and events.
- **Fund U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP) Staffing Needs:** Set aside at least \$77.4 million in FY2024 appropriations for the hiring of additional CBP officers and training and support the Securing America's Ports of Entry Act (S. 1253). It is paramount that all ports of entry have adequate CBP Officer staffing. Due to current CBP staffing gaps, CBP officers have been transferred to land ports of entry, often forcing ports to pay for overtime and staffing for security related services through reimbursable services agreements that limit opportunities to invest in projects that improve the traveler experience. Due to inadequate staffing, nine of our top 10 airports experienced customs wait times of 2 hours or more on a monthly basis this year.

Domestic Travel

- **Modernize Air Travel:** Ensure FAA reauthorization legislation:
 1. Provides at least \$50 million per year for aviation workforce development programs, which would help increase the supply of qualified pilots and mechanics. The legislation should also direct FAA to update its pilot training rules to provide additional pathways to certification.
 2. Directs the FAA to update their staffing models for Air Traffic Control to account for projected growth in air traffic demand, while also ensuring the agency has enough funding to hire needed air traffic controllers.
 3. Provides at least \$4 billion per year in Airport Improvement Program grants and a rebalanced formula that provides medium- and large-hub airports a higher share of grants while maintaining funding levels for smaller airports. Currently, medium- and large-hub airports account for 80% of enplanements, but only receive around 25% of AIP funds.
- **Fund Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Staffing Needs:** Set aside at least \$5.1 billion in FY2024 appropriations for TSA to hire additional Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) and ensure they receive competitive pay. With the number of people passing through TSA checkpoints on the rise and future peak periods projected to regularly outpace past peaks, more investment needs to be made in TSO staffing and transportation security infrastructure to improve TSA capabilities and the overall traveler experience.

Workforce

- **Increase H-2B Guest Worker Visas:**

Expand access to the H-2B guest worker program by including language in FY2024 appropriations that exempts returning workers from the annual H-2B cap. Additionally, legislation should be enacted to permanently raise the current cap from 66,000 to 150,000, while providing exemptions for returning workers and certain other H-2B workers that work for employers that previously participated in the program over the last 5 years and have remained in good standing under the rules of the program. Gaps in the travel workforce remain a significant drag on the industry, forcing travel businesses to reduce their hours, services, or quality of service. Increases in H-2B and J1 visas are needed to stabilize travel businesses, expand opportunities for domestic workers, and improve the overall travel experience.

National Parks

- **Support National Parks:** Set aside \$983 million in FY2024 appropriations for the National Park Service to meet ongoing operational and maintenance needs, while continuing to support the annual \$1.3 billion provided by the Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152) to reduce the \$22.3 billion maintenance backlog. Congress should also consider reforms that allow greater flexibility for parks to utilize the fees they collect or private funds for maintenance and improvements. Adequate funding for maintenance and operations is critical to both conservation and visitor access.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the pandemic, the U.S. travel industry generated \$2.6 trillion in economic impact and supported one in 10 American jobs. Every region, state and community across the country benefits from travel and travel is vital to our nation's global competitiveness.

When travel came to a standstill, the absence of its contributions to spending, employment, tax revenue and a positive trade balance became evident. 3 million jobs were lost in 2020 just in the travel industry alone—underscoring the brutal impact a lack of travel has on the workforce and communities across the country. Today, the growth of all sectors of the travel economy are essential to fueling growth in all sectors of the nation's economy. Despite the strength of leisure travel, international inbound travel and business travel, meetings and events are years away from pre-pandemic growth.

In 2022, domestic business travel spending was still 27% below pre-pandemic levels and international inbound spending, a staggering 48% below. Getting all sectors back to growth is necessary for all sectors of the economy.

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